

Speech of Prime Minister Ivica Račan delivered upon presenting the Croatian application for EU membership

Dear Mr Prime Minister,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly pleased that the Republic of Croatia has the opportunity to submit its application for membership in the European Union in Athens, the cradle of democracy and the capital of a country with which we co-operate successfully, with which we have stable and friendly relations and with which we share the responsibility for stability and development in South-east Europe. On this occasion I would like to thank our hosts for their endorsement of our aims, and for the great efforts invested by Greece in regional peace, stability and democratic development under exceptionally complex and sensitive circumstances for the EU and the international community in general.

Allow me the liberty to recall that with this act, Croatia is finally formalizing its strategic commitment to become a vital component of a new political entity on the world's geopolitical map. When we speak of the new Europe, the use of grand words can hardly be avoided. But what other word, besides historical, can be used to describe the process currently under way on the European continent? For in the past Europe was a flashpoint of fierce conflict, but today it is a zone of peace and co-operation. What other alternative is there for Croatia, a country located both culturally and geographically at Europe's very heart, than to become an equal and beneficial constituent in this very same Europe?

I am proud that today Croatia's citizens are unwavering in their desire to achieve this objective.

The fact that in Croatia there is an undivided political consensus on membership in the European Union greatly eases the work of my Government in the implementation of the necessary, but also difficult and sensitive, reforms.

Our belief in the European system of values is complete and unequivocal. Croatia is well aware of the principles on which the Union is founded and rests upon – principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. These principles are common to the Member States, they are essential guidance for Croatia as well, and we stand determined to continue with their promotion, improvement and protection.

It is for our own sakes, for the sake of our general welfare and a better future for all, that we are working wholeheartedly to further develop a potent and more productive economy, a genuinely democratic society and the rule of law. However, unlike many other states, which emerged after the fall of the last undemocratic regimes in Europe, we did not have the good fortune to embark upon these tasks peacefully and unhindered. The aggression against Croatia inevitably delayed our progress on this path.

Nevertheless, the results we have achieved despite all odds encourage us to ask that Croatia be granted the opportunity for accelerated progress, and that the instruments necessary to fulfill all preordained conditions be placed at Croatia's disposal. We are greatly encouraged by the successes of our nearest neighbours, for as of next year the borders of the European Union shall only be short distance from Croatia's capital city. Their achievements guarantee that our every step forward will be observed and rewarded, and our values be recognized and commended. We look forward to that day, once we have made up for lost time, when each and every country in the European Union shall sincerely welcome us into their company.

The recent meetings we held at the highest levels, just as my meeting today with Prime Minister Simitis, sustain our belief that our ambitions are justified, timely and well – conceived.

A united Europe is a challenge for an era without precedent. Croatia is entitled to participate in this momentous process.

Croatia additionally wants to prove that it is worthy of doing so.